

# Jaques Callot's *The Plundering of a Large Farmhouse*, in *Les Grandes Miseres at Malheurs de la Guerre*

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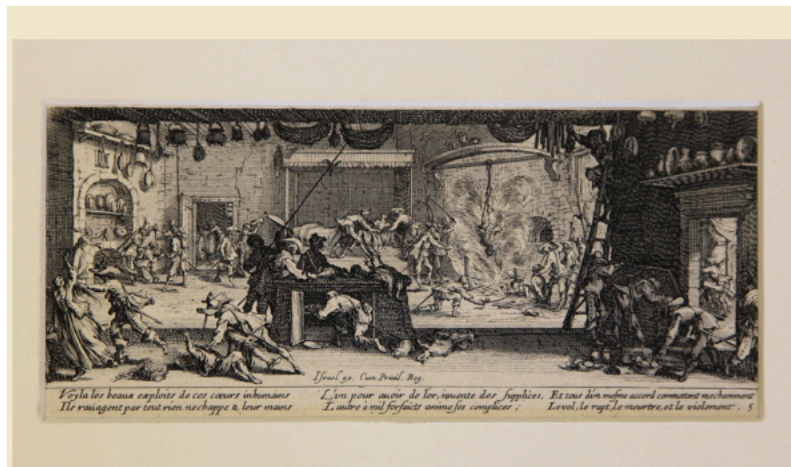


Plate Five in Jacques Callot's *Les Grandes Miseres at Malheurs de la Guerre* (The Large Miseries)

**Jaques Callot's *The Plundering of a Large Farmhouse,*  
in *Les Grandes Miseres at Malheurs de la Guerre***

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Topics in Baroque

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Scholars have long debated the standing of Jacques Callot's *Grandes Miseres at Malheurs de la Guerre* as anti-war propaganda, often questioning the impartial nature the work. There are no specific historical events described, nor nationalistic symbols, or flags to denote a preference. Was Callot's intent for the piece solely to be anti-war propaganda, however, there would be present more scenes showing the brutalities of battle. The fifth plate in the series shows *The Plundering of a Large Farmhouse*<sup>1</sup> in which soldiers torment civilians by looting, raping and killing. Despite the lack of specific symbolism, *The Large Miseries* may not just be a protest or documentation of war, but a more specific and covert protest of the King. Instead, this seems to be a protest in the name of civilians directed towards King Louis XIII.

There is a common reading of apathy in Callot's subjects. This understandable when comparing him to many of his Baroque contemporaries, take Bernini, for instance, who was crafting his dramatically emotive figures at the same time as Callot was working. Compared to the obvious passion of Bernini's figures, Callot's figures at first glance seem conservative. Mayor and Baskin use the terms 'good manners' and 'indifference' in their description of the *Large Miseries*,<sup>2</sup> and Wolfthal claims that his figures 'display little emotion.'<sup>3</sup> While emotion may not be plentiful in the facial expressions of most of Callot's subjects (save the few victims in *The Plundering of a Large Farmhouse*, which will be discussed later), it is amply evident in their bodily movements and in their careful positioning.

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<sup>1</sup> The title of this plate ranges from Le Pillage, Pillage of a House, to Plundering of a Farm, depending on the source. The title *The Plundering of a Large Farmhouse* will be used here, because that is what is used by Callot expert Howard Daniel [Daniel, H. (ed.) 1974. *Callot's Etchings*. 338 prints, New York: Dover]

<sup>2</sup> A. Hyatt Mayor and Leonord Baskin, "The Etchings of Jacques Callot," *The Massachusetts Review*, Vol. 3, No. 1 (Autumn, 1961), pp. 121.

<sup>3</sup> Diane Wolfthal, "Jaques Callot's Miseries of War," *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 59, No. 2 (June, 1977), pp. 222.

There can be no denying the drama evident in any of Callot's compositions, especially in the fifth plate of the *Large Miseries*. The image is littered with raking diagonals that interrupt one another. Every figure save the roasting gentleman in the back is in some way moving diagonally. Several figures are in the midst of large sweeping movements, such as the soldier in the left foreground who is about to stab his victim through the heart. His back leg leads up through his torso, whose sharp angle continues through the top of his hat. Along the way up his torso the gaze is almost subconsciously interrupted by the straps that cross the figures back, and again by the brim of the hat whose edges draw the gaze perpendicularly and in opposing directions.

This complicated experience is a microcosm of the complete work. Even figures who are standing upright are tense with opposing diagonals. In the back left corner of the room, on either side of the open door, with backs facing each other are two upright gentlemen who embody that same pull as the afore mentioned soldier. Here the drama is in the legs: the legs are strong, the stances are wide, knees are hyperextended, which in conjunction with the heels and toes of the shoes, add a slight arch to the diagonal. The swords of these two men come off of their hips at opposing angles to their legs, almost intersecting each other at a perfectly perpendicular point.

These diagonals are especially effective because of their contrast with the perfectly vertical and horizontal structure of the farmhouse and the arrangements of its goods. While the sweeping diagonals exemplify the chaos of the scene, the vertical and horizontal lines echo the order that once was. The plates and pans that have not yet been seized in the back left corner of the room and the stark silhouettes of the pots hanging in the upper foreground so convincingly

show the pull of gravity. These vertical and horizontal lines are echoed in Callot's crosshatching of the farmhouse walls and furniture some of the few things still in tact.

In a sinister manifestation of these more orderly movements is the presumed farmer hanging by his feet in the back right of the room. His is the only figure in the room that does not participate in a raking diagonal motion, quite the opposite he is pulled directly downward by gravity. There is no moan of agony visible in his face, as would have been provided by Bernini, Caravaggio or Callot's close friend and fellow court artist Deruet. However, this scene does not fail to evoke emotional response from the viewer. The theatrics of the piece are not found where it is human nature to first look, the face of the suffering man.

Only three faces in this scene bear obvious emotion. There is the mother and her child in the bottom left corner, and the man in the back left corner of the room who is on his knees at the mercy of three soldiers, all three of which look at their attackers in terror. Compassion is evoked from the viewer by the body movements as well as the facial expressions of the innocent victims. Callot conveys the passion of the attackers through their unwavering violent movements, but he omits the facial connection that is present with the victims. Because the murderousness is not present in the faces of the soldiers, it can be deduced that their actions do not come from their own personal passions, but from the greater efforts and instructions of their commander.

Upon returning to Nancy from over a decade spent in Rome and Florence, Callot was disheartened to see the state that the war had had on his native Lorraine. Within the year of his return, a Count Mansfield in the name of King Louis XIII had lead his men to devastate Lorraine for five days during which they killed anyone they encountered, raped, damaged and stole

mercilessly despite the fact that they were amply provisioned.<sup>4</sup> The suffering extended far past these five days for all the carcasses left behind by Mansfield and his men, of human and of livestock, caused disease and death for a significant portion of the remainder of Lorraine's countrymen.<sup>5</sup> In the years between his return to Nancy and his completion of the plates Callot would be confronted with several more occurrences like this. Mayor and Baskin mention a 'certain dramatic indifference that he must have learned by growing up in Lorraine in the midst of burning and butchering,'<sup>6</sup> implying a desensitization to the brutality. Though he may have grown used to it, it hardly seems that he was indifferent towards the injustice suffered by Lorraine.

In 1633 King Louis XIII invaded Lorraine and took over power. According to his biographer Andre Felibien, upon Louis XIII's request for an etching celebrating the siege of Nancy, 'Callot refused, saying he would sooner cut off his thumb.'<sup>7</sup> Following the invasion of Lorraine, citizens were demanded to take an oath of allegiance to the King (else suffer dire consequences)<sup>8</sup> by the end of 1634. Felibien wrote that Callot procrastinated taking this oath until a mere eight days prior to the deadline<sup>9</sup> and that he later denied a pension offered to him by the King.<sup>10</sup> All three of these instances demonstrate that Callot felt some animosity towards the King and his actions in Lorraine.

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<sup>4</sup> [Clive Cornew, "From "Misery" to "Disaster": Perceptions of seventeenth-and eighteenth- century warfare in the etchings of Jacques Callot and Francisco Goya," *South African Journal of Art History*, Vol. 13 (1998), pp. 73.

<sup>5</sup> Cornew, 74.

<sup>6</sup> Mayor & Baskin, 122.

<sup>7</sup> Wolfthal, 224

<sup>8</sup> Threatened consequences were confiscation of property and expulsion from Lorraine. [Cornew, 68]

<sup>9</sup> Cornew, 68.

<sup>10</sup> Wolfthal, 224

Hornstien disputes the presence of accusation in the series, arguing that the work is ‘not a question of calling for the end of wars in general but rather of coping with its constant presence.’<sup>11</sup> Though it may be true that no symbolism denotes the nationalities of the soldiers nor the identity of the civilians, and no specific historic events can be properly identified in *The Large Miseries*, it does not mean that the work lacked a rebellious motive. The plates were completed around the same time that Louis XIII invaded Nancy, and had the potential to spread all throughout Europe (which they did). Should Callot have included specific references and accusations in the work, he would have endangered himself, especially with the King in such close proximity to himself.

Mayor asserts that, ‘In the age of autocrats the realist Callot, knowing that he could do nothing to alter events, observed..with the detached, astute, and witty eye of the courtier.’<sup>12</sup> So perhaps Callot did not fuel *The Large Miseries* with anti-war messages. But this does not mean that he acted without agenda. It is clear that this educated, talented and cultured artist was not ‘indifferent’ to the political upheaval surrounding him. Rather shrewdly he may have infused this work with a spirit of protest from the people to their autocrat, in a series that even King Louis XIII himself may have enjoyed.

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<sup>11</sup> Katie Hornstien, “Just Violence: Jacques Callot’s *Grandes Miseres et Malheurs de la Guerre*,” *The University of Michigan Museums of Art and Archaeology Bulletin*, Vol. 16 (2006) pp. 45.

<sup>12</sup> A. Hyatt Mayor, “A Bequest of Prints by Callot and Daumier,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, Vol. 17, No. 1 (Summer, 1958), pp. 11, and Mayor & Baskin, 132.

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